



The United States Attorney's Office

Southern District of Texas

News Release

July 14, 2008

CANADIAN CITIZEN CONVICTED OF ILLEGAL SALE OF SATELLITE TV DECODING DEVICES

(HOUSTON, Texas) - Garr Thickens, 56, has pleaded guilty to one count of the illegal manufacture, distribution and possession of unlawful wire, oral or electronic communication devices, United States Attorney Don DeGabrielle announced today. Thickens, a Canadian citizen, was arrested by Secret Service agents in January 2008 and will remain in the U.S. while on bond pending his sentencing.

Commercial satellite television programs are broadcast by the satellite television service providers in an encrypted format only allowing a customer to view the programming if they have a signal decoder box and the proper un-encryption codes installed. Legitimate satellite television customers must open an account with a satellite television provider in order to obtain satellite television decoder boxes. Customers must also pay a monthly subscription fee to the satellite television provider for their satellite television programming as well as pay separately for each "pay-per-view" television event, such a movies, concerts and sporting events.

Thickens, a Canadian citizen who spent the winter months of the last several years in a trailer park in Port Aransas, Texas, was apprehended following a two-year Secret Service investigation. Thickens was a major North American distributor of a particular type of satellite decoder device called Dreamboxes. These Dreamboxes contained un-encryption codes that allowed persons who bought the decoder devices to illegally obtain satellite television programs, including pay-per-view events, from providers such as Direct TV and Dish Network without having a satellite television account or paying any fees for the programming.

Undercover Secret Service agents purchased at least three of the satellite decoder devices from websites operated by Thickens who then provided the agents with the un-encryption codes for the devices. This allowed the agents to obtain satellite television programming

and pay-per-view events without having a satellite television account or paying for the programming.

Satellite television service providers change their encryption codes periodically for security reasons. Thickens provided the new un-encryption codes to all his customers, including the undercover Secret Service agents, who were also his customers. Thickens also sold the undercover Secret Service agent a newer and more electronically sophisticated satellite television decoder box that would automatically download and install its own un-encryption codes directly from surreptitious sites on the internet.

A federal search warrant was executed on Thickens trailer home in Port Aransas in January 2008 and found that Thickens had his own satellite television decoder box installed in his home along with the un-encryption codes that allowed him to watch satellite television programming without paying for it. Thickens also sold and set up another satellite decoder box system for a fellow resident of the trailer park, which was also recovered from that person. As additional supply of unsold decoder boxes was found in Thickens' trailer, Thickens was arrested on these charges following completion of the search.

Evidence presented to the court during the guilty plea hearing revealed Thickens sold more than 4,000 satellite television decoder boxes along with un-encryption codes over the last few years, at prices from \$289 to \$699 each.

Thickens will be sentenced by U.S. District Judge Vanessa Gilmore on Nov. 11, 2008 and faces a maximum term of imprisonment of up to five years imprisonment, plus a fine of up to \$250,000 and a maximum term of three years of post-imprisonment supervised release.

The crime was investigated by the Houston office of the U.S. Secret Service, with technical assistance from satellite television industry investigators. The case was prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Mike Schultz.

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